

***God's Son Saves the World***  
**March-April Sermon Series**  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
April 18, 2021

**TEXT: Matthew 9:9-13**



Two weeks ago, we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, and those events have changed the world. They changed the narrative of the world. They've changed the way we relate to the world, and those who first encounter Jesus, who saw Him crucified and then saw Him resurrected from the dead, their lives changed. Because their lives changed, they began to act differently. They begin to think differently. They begin to speak differently. They began to relate to other people differently, and they also wrote differently. They wrote differently than the world had ever seen, and they produced a new kind of writing, a new genre of writing. The world had had proverbs; the world had had prophetic oracles; the world had had narratives and histories, but all of a sudden, the world had a new genre of writing, and it was something different. It was a type of writing called a Gospel.

The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus. They don't tell us everything we would want to know. The Gospels are a narrative about Jesus' life and His teaching. They are about His death, His resurrection, and His instructions to His disciples after He had been raised. The Gospels are not only to give us information. The Gospels are written to persuade. Most people throughout history have encountered the Gospels orally. The text that we just read is from the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew takes about two and a half hours to read out loud. It was written to be heard, but it was also written to be read, and these early followers of Jesus published an account of Jesus's life, death and resurrection in order to persuade you and me to hear Jesus' call and reorient our lives. They wrote because they had been changed by Jesus.

This morning, we look at the Gospel of Matthew, and our passage is Matthew's cameo appearance in the Gospel. Each Gospel writer makes a cameo appearance in the narrative to signal to us that the Gospel is not just information about someone else and for someone else, but the Gospel writers, or the evangelists themselves, indicate that they had been reached by Jesus, and they want you to be. So this morning, we look at the Gospel of Matthew and how Matthew highlights for us that Jesus comes to save the sick. Let's jump into the narrative in Matthew 9. In Matthew 9:9, we read:

*“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ And he rose and followed Him.”*

Jesus is in Galilee at the time, and He saw a man called Matthew. This is Matthew the Gospel writer, and he is in the text. Just as Alfred Hitchcock – for those of you who love those films – used to make a cameo appearance in his films, Matthew's is in the narrative. Jesus saw the man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth, the customs office, probably at the intersection between Herod Philip's territory and Herod Antipas's territory, and when Jesus saw him sitting there, He said: “Follow Me,” and Matthew rose and followed Him. Command, fulfillment. We are not given access to the details of Matthew's deliberation, and we don't know how long the interval was, but when Jesus passed by and said, “Follow Me,” all of a sudden, what we do have is a new change of direction. Matthew is no longer sitting. He is following. He is no longer at the center of his life. He is following Someone else at the center. He has a new personal direction, a new movement, and that new movement, that new direction, then requires him to watch Jesus, listen to Him, and go where He goes. This new direction changes not only Matthew's life but, in the next verse, it also changes the people around him.

We read that Jesus reclined at the table in Matthew's house. In Luke's account of the same scene, we are told that the house is, in fact, Matthew's house, and Matthew, after following Jesus, or beginning this new direction, hosts a banquet in his home and a number of his peers and others around him also adopt this new direction. There's movement. I really want you to see that there's movement here, not just individually, but there is a community movement. A new personal direction is being set by these people who, all of a sudden, are moving toward Jesus. That's happening through Matthew's indirect agency, and they are there at a banquet. We know it's a banquet because they were reclining, which is technical terminology in the first century for how you eat at a banquet. Normal meals you eat sitting down, just as you and I eat them, but banquet meals or feasts are in a reclining position.

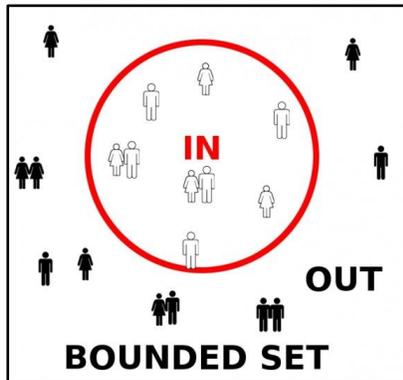
Some of you are wondering how you eat when you are reclined. Let me just tell you. I've eaten like this only once. It was very memorable. When our children were growing up, we studied a civilization every summer, and this particular summer was a Roman summer. My godly, brilliant

wife came up with this idea: We will study a civilization, read their literature, understand their worldview, talk about how the gospel came to those people, and then finish with a banquet and eat their food. We were at this time at the end of the summer and time for the Roman feast, so we transformed our porch into a triclinium. We took all the porch furniture out, marinated the food for days with Roman spices, preparing to grill it, and we put three mattresses out in the U-shape form of a *triclinium*. We invited one Kenwood family to join us, a family we thought would have the right spirit or intensity about it. We were in togas; we were ready. The doorbell rang. They were there, and I wondered what I would find. I opened the door, and there they were in togas with wreaths on, and the son launched into the Pledge of Allegiance in Latin. I was sure we had invited the right people for a Roman feast. We reclined, talked and lingered, not feeling rushed. When the meal was over, we did a tour of the grounds and looked around at the plants, like the free Romans that we were. My neighbor came out of his house and looked at us with a stunned expression and rushed back inside. I saw his wife the next day. I said, "How is everything going with your family?" She said, "You know, Doug's not doing well. He is not sleeping well. He is having all kinds of nightmares. He had a nightmare that he looked outside and in your backyard, there were all these people in togas walking around your backyard!" I said, "That's so weird!"

Jesus is reclining. He is at the banquet, feasting, and what I want you to see is that people are drawn to Him. It's an observable, sociological phenomenon of movement toward a person, and this movement, this community movement, this description sociologically, can be described in a in a very distinct way. I want to introduce to you this sociological concept that has been extremely helpful in my own understanding of the Christian life. It's the difference between a Bounded Set and a Centered Set. This was first described by Paul Hiebert in his book: *"Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues."* What a great title. The title is about human behavior and how it relates to mission. That's what the book is about. I first learned about this when I was in the Middle East and I was introduced to the difference between a Bounded Set and a Centered Set by Dr. Martin Accad, who teaches at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. I was riveted when Dr. Accad first described this. I realized that he was describing something that is really critical for how you and I think about our life as disciples and the mission that were on, because we are reading the evangelists to learn from them how they shared the gospel with their society. That is our task.



A Bounded Set is a set that looks like this. In a bounded set, the community is focused on who's in and who's out, and the energy in the bounded set is around the circle. You see the red circle of a bounded set means that you are concerned and your intellectual energy, your spiritual

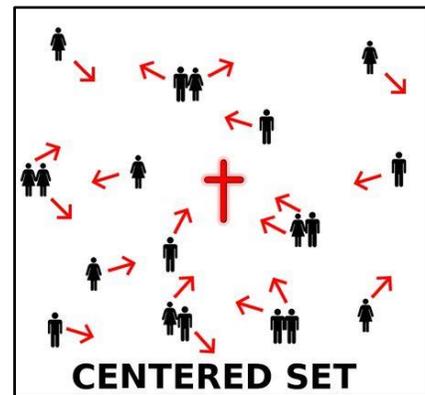


energy, goes to defending the perimeter. You are focused on issues; you are focused on secondary topics. What's your opinion about this or that? Which Bible translation do you use? Are you for women in leadership or not? What are your political views? How about your views on the virus - do you wear a mask in public or not? You are circling around the perimeter, and a bounded set spends its energy determining who's out based on the boundary. You draw the boundary, and you redraw the boundary. When the boundary seems

threatened, you get antsy and upset, and in a bounded set, notice that everyone outside the circle is out. They are dark, colored in, and everyone inside the circle is assumed to be in. What is attractive about the bounded set is its clarity. It seems to offer a very tidy and clean picture of the world. It's easy to understand, and you focus your attention on the perimeter: I'm in; and you are out. It cultivates an "us" versus "them" mentality. It's easy to grasp. It's comforting. Whenever we use bounded set paradigms – and I listen and I hear people speaking in a bounded set way – those using them are always on the inside of the circle, always. But the tragedy of the bounded set paradigm is that it assumes the center, and it doesn't feed and fuel the center, because the energy in a bounded set way of understanding the Christian life is spent on the perimeter.

A centered set is different. A centered set is dynamic. It has some ambiguity in a certain way.

You could see all the people have the same color. There are arrows going in all kinds of directions. At first glance, the centered set seems chaotic, and it makes us a little nervous. Yet centered set has its center in the cross. The centered set is centered in the Person of Jesus, and so the goal of the community is not to define the boundary. The goal of the community and of the Christian life is to lead people toward the center, and I believe that the future of our church depends on whether we adopt a bounded set mentality or



centered set. A bounded set is so tempting. It's so clear; it's so safe. But the centered set is transformational. The centered set means that you and I will devote our energy toward the center. That means we will fuel the center. We will add logs to the brightness of the Person of Christ. We will talk about Christ. We will talk about Christ with people who are on this side of us and with people on that side of us. It means that the people, the community, will be recognized by their proximity or movement toward the center. It will mean, if we embrace a centered set paradigm, that our church will be filled with people who, from a human point of view, are very different. And if you look at the centered set diagram closely you might have someone coming

from one side and someone coming from the opposite side, and with respect to each other, they seem to be on a head-on collision course. One person is becoming more self-restrained and the other is becoming more relaxed. One person is discovering new freedoms in Christ and the other is discovering that freedom in Christ means the freedom not to care about their own rights. A centered set is a group of people who are moving toward the center. There's a lot at stake. That means that we don't really talk and care so much about who's in and who's out as much as we care about moving toward the center. I think centered set thinking is also transformational in our marriages. Rather than defining the marriage by agreement or disagreement around a boundary set of issues, marriage thrives when two people are moving toward the center, and as a byproduct of that center movement that is towards Christ, they get closer to each other. I want us to live for the center.

The center doesn't mean a lukewarm middle-ground, or the golden mean in the Aristotelian sense. That's not what centered set is. It is about pursuing Jesus Christ. In their book, *The Shape of Things to Come*, by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, they say that for us, the center is Jesus Himself. The gospel is the central imperative for Christian mission; at the core of the centered set is Christ, and a church, our church, should be concerned about drawing people toward Christ. We should be able to handle and tolerate a wide range of opinions on things where our society loves to draw the boundaries that you're in or you're out. In the centered set, as you get closer to the center – that is Christ – then the church believes that your behavior and your thinking and your spending start to reflect your proximity to Christ. It means that growth toward the center, growth in Christ-likeness, is the process of discipleship.

What does this have to do with our passage? It has everything to do with it because there's a meal happening and a tax collector and sinners are moving toward Christ. As they do so, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, say: "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" This, beloved, is a classic example of bounded set thinking. The Pharisees have drawn the boundary. Central features of that boundary are that you stay away from sinners. Central to the Pharisees' practice and way of living is to maintain a separation from all sources, personal and impersonal, of ritual impurity. That's why they're called Pharisees. *Pharas* in Hebrew means to separate, to stay back from dangerous things and dangerous people. You draw the boundary to keep the bad people away, and then, inside the boundary, the central praxis of the pharisaic life is the study of Scripture and the eating of meals in a state of ritual purity with others who are like you – the "in" group. The Pharisees were a lay movement, and they ate their meals in a state of ritual purity that was required of the priesthood. They took that on voluntarily, and so they think in this bounded set way and draw the boundary that keeps you away from the dangerous people, and then you get along with people who are just like you. If our church adopts a bounded set mentality in this way and stays away from the dangerous people and just

hunkers down with people just like us, we have no future. It is not just about our having a future, but really deeper than that, it means that we betray the mission for which Christ has sent us. So, they ask this question: “Why does Jesus do that?”

Jesus gives us two answers in this passage and one at the very end of the Gospel. It is interesting, isn't it, that the Pharisees asked the disciples their question. You can get the sense that they're talking on the side, which is so bounded set – safely at the side, safely on the perimeter. They are murmuring at the perimeter to the disciples, asking: “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus hears the discussion happening on the perimeter, and He answers their question directly. He first answered the “why” in Matthew 9:12:

*“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”*

Beloved, people all around us are hurting. Some of them are physically sick. Some of them are emotionally sick or psychologically sick. Some of them are crushingly lonely and depressed. Some of them are paralyzed with anxiety and fear over the future, and some of them have experienced great loss. Some of them have lost jobs, lost family members. Some of them are just disoriented. Some of them are perplexed by the dynamics in our culture that seems so eager to say who's in and who's out, and they are disoriented and they are sick. Jesus says that all those people are welcome close to Him, and He breaks down this boundary, this bounded set way of thinking.

Jesus says: “Why do I eat with tax collectors and sinners? It's because you go towards the sick and hurting and not away from them.” This is only possible, beloved, if you adopt this centered set way of operating. That means you're free to roam and point people to Jesus the Healer, the



Physician. It means you don't stay safely inside the boundary and away from the people who are hurting. One of the best recent examples of Christian faith, living out of the center Jesus Christ and going toward the hurting was the story of Dr. Kent Brantley. In 2013 to 2016, the world experienced the terror of what was called an epidemic.

We didn't call it pandemic because it didn't reach the whole world. It was in West Africa predominantly. But in West Africa, in December 2013, the first cases of Ebola were recorded, a very dangerous, deadly virus with a mortality rate of 40%. Thousands of people were dying. People were staying away. But some people moved toward the situation and the danger, and they did that out of their faith in Christ. I urge you to watch this film, “Facing Darkness.” if you've never seen it. It was produced by Samaritan's Purse, and it tells the story. It is an even more powerful story in light of what we've experienced in the last year. But Kent Brantley and

others actually went to Africa, into the midst of danger, and were instrumental in providing medical care and instructing people on basic forms of hygiene and preventative care to slow the spread of the virus, until it was ultimately contained. Kent Brantley ended up being one of the first Americans to contract the Ebola virus as a result, and his life hung in the balance. People asked him: "Did you have enough faith to believe that God would protect you?" I love his answer. He said: "My faith actually caused me to put myself in danger." Faith isn't about a bounded set thinking. It's about a centered set way of thinking and bringing people who are sick and hurting to Jesus, and that means following Him. Kent Brantley, and the other physicians who stepped forward in this time of crisis, were honored as Person of the Year by



*Time Magazine* in 2014. Kent Brantley said: "Faith is central to my life. I do what I do because of my faith." He said: "The gospel is really big. The gospel is good news that God is no longer counting people's sins against them, and the command He has given us to plead with the world to come back to God is inseparable from the command to love your neighbor and have compassion on those in need." That's centered set thinking. That is saying the gospel is really big. It's good news for all, and it means that I go out following Jesus and I call people from all over toward Him, because when you're sick and hurting, you need a doctor. When you are sick and hurting and sin or suffering or oppression is destroying you, you need Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ comes to people primarily through you. That is Jesus' first answer. Why do I eat with them? Because sinful people need a doctor.

The second reason He gives is in Matthew 9:13. Jesus says to the Pharisees:

*"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

That little phrase, go and learn, is insider language in the pharisaic culture or subculture. One of the most famous exchanges in rabbinic discourse is when a pagan man comes to Hillel, who was a leading scholar at the time of Jesus' growing up. When you see student centers on university campuses, they are often called the Hillel Center after this famous rabbinic sage. A man from a pagan background came to Hillel and asked him a somewhat arrogant question: "Can you summarize the whole Bible for me while you stand on one foot?" To summarize the whole Bible while standing on one foot is like someone's asking you to tell him everything he needs to know about Jesus Christ in a text message. It would be hard to do! Hillel said: "I'll tell you." He stood on one foot, and he said: "I'll try to do it: That which is hurtful to your neighbor do not do. That's the whole Bible; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." The line, "Go and learn it," is written on the main wall of the atrium at Hebrew Union College. It is a critical line for rabbinic culture: "Go and learn it!" Jesus invokes this challenge when he says to them: "Go and learn

this.”

He then quotes Hosea 6:6:

*“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”*

The word that's used here in Hosea 6:6 is that great, wonderful, majestic Old Testament word *hesed*: steadfast love, loyalty, compassion, mercy. I desire people to live out the character of God in visible, tangible ways more than I want you to check your religious box. Jesus isn't contrasting one form of religion versus another, but he's saying I want you to live the center. I don't want you to be preoccupied with the boundary and think you're all set. Mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus invites His hearers to the center, to live out the center. I think that when He spoke these words, something clicked for Matthew. I think that Matthew, when he heard Jesus describe living out of the center, was drawn to Him and said: “This is it.” He had grown up around a religious way of living that was focused on the boundary and missed the center, and when you focus on the boundary, you will miss the center. That's the ultimate danger of it, and there will be a gap between who you pretend to be and who you really are. Matthew heard Jesus say at that banquet in his home: “This is the center, and I want you to live it out, and you live it out by following Me.”

All around our passage, we see Jesus breaking down these bounded set barriers and calling people to believe in Him. In the chapter right before this, He heals a servant of a Roman centurion and then tells him that many will come from east and west and recline. There it is – a *triclinium*. It's a banquet. It's fellowship: recline with each other. Jesus says in Matthew 8:11:

*“I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”*

You see that is centered set thinking. They come from all directions to the kingdom. We have to be kingdom-people who keep our eyes on the center and let Him use us to draw other people to Him. In the following verses, Jesus heals a Roman centurion; He heals Peter's mother-in-law; He heals the ruler of the society; and a young girl He raises from the dead. He heals the blind, carries our diseases, and Jesus' healing ministry and restoring ministry and forgiving ministry is happening from all these directions. Do you see that a Roman centurion would not get along well with the ruler of the synagogue, or this woman who was hurting and suffering could be pushed aside? But Jesus is calling all these people to Him, and they become a recognizable group. We become a recognizable group as a group of people moving toward Jesus Christ.

I love Sunday morning, and I love being together, but I also love hearing how God uses you during the week touching lives, sowing seed, pointing people to Jesus in direct and indirect

ways, going toward the people who are hurting and not away from them. As this flurry of healings and saving works are described in Matthew 8 and 9, Jesus does something very bold at the end of Matthew 9 and into Matthew 10. Jesus goes around, Matthew says, to all the seas and villages, teaching, proclaiming the kingdom, and healing every disease, and then He sees the crowds and He turns the disciples and says in Matthew 9:37-38:

*“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”*

“I want you to go now.” Some of us will feel tempted to stop reading right here because we think Jesus should do it all. But Jesus turns and says: “My kingdom proclamation is going to be made known.” It’s just so humbling. He could do it without us. He could write it in the sky, and yet He looks at us and He says: “I want you to go and proclaim the arrival of the kingdom. I want you to go and proclaim healing for those who are sick.” Jesus tells us: “I want you to go.” He has all authority in heaven and on earth. And then He sends us out in His name. If we go out with the bounded set mentality, we will not be very effective, because we will think that everyone who agrees with us on all the peripheral issues is really saved, and that’s a mistake. We will also spend too much of our time and energy defining the edge and will stay away from people who are hurting. Jesus says instead: “Go, announce the kingdom, heal the sick, bring people into proximity to Me.” That’s a church that has a future; that’s an exciting dynamic; that’s a place to see Jesus’ power; and it means we’re free to move and go wherever He sends us. All you have to do is feed the center of love for Christ in your own heart, feed the center with a love for His Word, and then, wherever you go, whomever you meet, you should listen first and ask some questions first to get a sense of which direction this person needs to go to head toward Jesus.

The ending of the Gospel provides us with Jesus’ third answer to the question at Mathew’s party: “Why do You eat with tax collectors and sinners?” It’s because Jesus came and told us to make disciples of all nations, living out from the center and pointing everyone toward Him. The ending of Matthew’s Gospel is in Matthew 28:19:

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”*

Conversion, that is putting Christ at the center, and then over time, the process of discipleship. It’s not merely agreement around the perimeter. The process of discipleship is in Matthew 28:20:

*“. . .teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

This happens over time as people move closer to the Person of Jesus and begin to act more like

Him. Growth toward the center, that is towards Jesus Christ, is the process of discipleship. Can we be a people who reject bounded set thinking and embrace centered set and actually walk through this life together with courageous confidence that Jesus Christ can save people from all different directions? Can we reject the mentality that says, "I need to stay away from dangerous people"? Can we reject the labeling of others and be people who are known by their love for the center, Jesus Christ, and who will simply call people to obey Him? If we do, I think that will be a very exciting future for us.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.